

The Fate of the Simulacrum in the *Blade Runner* Universe: More Human Than Human

Introduction

Jean Baudrillard in his seminal work *Simulacra and Simulation* describes the hyperreal as a place “sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distortion between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and for the simulated generation of differences” (Baudrillard 2). In the hyperreal, the real and the imaginary operate like an ouroboros, merging into one and feeding on the contradiction of their shared existence in the same space.

Blade Runner 2049 and the other films in the franchise are the embodiment of a world consumed by hyperreality, presenting a world inhabited by humans and bio-engineered beings known as replicants. Replicants look remarkably like humans, but subcontractors implanted their memories to create a psychic structure that inspires docility. An oft-repeated slogan within this universe is that replicants are “more human than human,” but this paper will show that replicants and humans work together to create and maintain their hyperreality; to maintain their imagined reality. They rely on each other to define what it truly means to be human. Therefore, the notion of personhood dissolves, and every instance of rebellion, self-discovery, and intimacy only acts to substantiate the hyperreal itself.

I begin by examining the world of *Blade Runner 2049* as a simulated environment, then analyzing instances of replicant identity and rebellion as hyperreal performances, then showing how gendered figures like Joi and Luv expose the simulation of subjectivity and finally contrasting Wallace and Joshi to reveal how institutions sustain the hyperreal. The topic of this paper is increasingly important in our own world, where we see the encroachment of the hyperreal and an attempt to redefine personhood in relation to digital constructions. It is essential that we maintain a strong connection to our sense of self and not cede ground to corporations that seek to enforce simulacra as a replacement for human beings.

The World as Simulacrum

The primary setting of *Blade Runner 2049* is Los Angeles. *Blade Runner 2049* opens with a roaming view of the city of Los Angeles in 2049. The world is dark as if the sun itself had been extinguished. It is reminiscent of Plato’s cave. Everywhere the viewer looks, they see shadows of the real, a construction of simulacra. The major light sources are artificial; they come from giant billboards and flashing holograms that desperately grab at the viewer’s attention as if the viewer of the film is the one being marketed to. Flying cars have headlights that catch the heavy particles of dust and smog in the air. There are large smokestacks belching flames into the darkness. The natural world of Los Angeles (which even in the real world is a maze of pavement, subdivisions, and skyscrapers that mask the natural world) is eliminated. The city is a simulacrum, a copy without an origin. The real is removed and, as such, never existed. One could

not imagine what the valley looked like before this construction took its place. It is a hyperreal world designed for the simulacrum.

The only other local visited in the film is the city of Las Vegas, “the desert of the real itself” (Baudrillard 1). It is a radioactive, uninhabitable desert of simulacra. Instead of darkness, there is a blinding light filtered through dust particles, bathing the entire world in orange. It’s as if K, the Blade Runner, and main character of the film, has escaped Plato’s cave, but even in the light there is nothing real to be found but only more shadows.

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Replicants as Simulacra

The hyperreal nature of the Blade Runner universe is totalized by the existence of the replicant. Replicants served as a labor force on Earth and far away planets. Replicants come into the world as full-grown adults, “born” so to speak, wet and sticky from a translucent plastic sack filled with an artificial equivalent of amniotic fluid. Subcontractors fabricate their memories to create a psychic structure for docility. From their creation, replicants have forced humanity to question what it means to be human. Replicants have asked the same question, leading to a desire for independence and acts of rebellion.

Fig. 3



The authorities identified replicants through a scan of their right eye, and there are two instances in the film where the symbolic act of removing this eye occurs. First, the Rebel in the “Blade Runner 2022: Black Out,” after completing the revolutionary act of blowing up the servers erasing any record that he was in fact a replicant, removes his right eye (Fig. 4). Second, another rebel replicant named Freysa has had her right eye removed, and it is unclear when this took place (Fig. 5). This is an act of freedom, an emancipatory act that will sever the authority’s ability to identify these two replicants. However, with The Rebel, this act is a hat on a hat. There is already no record that he was ever

a replicant in the first place, and this act doesn't garner less attention but would garner more attention. In a world where the authorities are hunting for replicants, an eyepatch will garner attention. The same can be said of Freysa. The simulated act of emancipation seems to protest too much, and rather than emancipate the replicant, it would bring them further scrutiny. This is made clear by the fact that Freysa is hiding, highlighting that this symbolic castration would seek attention rather than dismiss it. The replicant is doing a fantastic job of spontaneously doing the work for the human. This is emphasized in the first scene of *Blade Runner 2049*, where K tracks down and kills an older model replicant. He collects the eye like a sort of dog tag, putting it in a plastic bag where someone will probably sort it into a sea of other bags containing old replicant eyes. The lack of a right eye becomes the symbol of a dead replicant in the same way that having a right eye intact is a symbol of the live replicant. These symbols also manifest in the realm of the imaginary.

Replicants and the Imaginary

Prior to blowing up the servers, the Rebel tells Trixie there is "no heaven or hell for us. This world is all we got." The replicants do not get to participate in the spiritual realm that has been foundational to human existence. Replicants do not have access to the imagined worlds of heaven and hell. There is no imagined world for the replicant because the imagined world has merged with the real. Even the imagined world of memory is shut off from the replicant. Their memories are a construction grafted onto their psyche. Their difference from humans allows humans to solidify their imagined reality within this hyperreal space. Without the replicant, the human becomes lost, and the hyperreal collapses.

Trevor F. Anthony attempts to tie the replicant's existence to that of the exile: replicants are enslaved, banished, and given a four-year life span (Anthony 19). This is evidence of their exile status. He says, "The simulacrum in *Blade Runner* is not a copy of a copy; the exile never loses its referent to an original home or lived experience" (Anthony 22). This couldn't be further from the truth. First, there is a problem in the definition of simulacrum. The simulacrum is not a copy of a copy; it is a *copy without an origin*. The replicant has no original home, and most of its lived experience is a construction; it is in the realm of the imaginary. Their existence is a hyperreal conflagration of the real and the imaginary. K understands his memories are a construction. He knows his real is inextricably entangled with the imaginary, a fact that is



fundamental

to the film. It is the structure that K's reality is built on. There is one memory that K has that is real. It is presented as if the memory is from his childhood in a slave labor camp. The other children bully him because he is different. He carries around a small wooden horse that the bullies are trying to steal, and rather than give the horse to the bullies, he throws the horse in a kiln (Fig. 6). K returns to this enslaved child labor camp and finds the horse, proving the reality of his memory (Fig. 7). Armed with this knowledge, K goes to visit Dr. Ana Stelline, one subcontractor tasked with creating memories for replicants. K shows Stelline his memory with the help of a machine, and Stelline cries,



saying,

“Someone lived this, yes” (Fig. 8). K has a fit of rage at this news, but then he is emboldened to go on his revolutionary path to discover his origins. However, what Stelline fails to mention is that it wasn't K who lived this memory, but her. The memories that inhabit the replicant's mind are placed there to create a product, in this instance the product is a revolution, and to suggest that this is like the life of the exile or the status of the émigré is offensive to the real lived experience of these populations. It concedes the point to the bigot that somehow the exile or the émigré differs from the rest of us, is not altogether human. The exile or the émigré is a uniform mass, a production of identity with some predetermined ulterior motive.

Gendered Simulacra

A similar identity-based argument is made with the female characters of the film. Melanie Marotta makes the point that the cyberpunk genre is “populated with female characters that range from sex-worker to femme fatale” (Marotta 77). She identifies that this characterization of female characters is stereotypical, flat, and hurts the genre. This critique is valid and important. However, with *Blade Runner 2049*, it is important to recognize, like in the émigré’s case or the exile, that female representation is most often a simulation. They are simulacra, copies without origins. They do not connote real female humans, but are a fantasy made to bolster the reality of what it is to be female, and by conceding that these simulacra are actual representations, damage is done to the female body. This paper will analyze the role of three characters to examine this point: Luv, Joi/Mariette (their oneness will become apparent), and Lt. Joshi.



Luv is a replicant and serves as the primary antagonist, Wallace, assistant, and fixer. She has a single-minded focus to serve Wallace and the mission of creating replicants that can procreate (Fig. 9). Luv will do anything to achieve this goal, from deception and bribery to extreme violence. Her replicant status means that her memories are implanted, her psyche is a construction, and her desires are fabricated. Her lack of agency should not be interpreted as a symbol of the subjugation of a female character, but that she isn’t human. By interpreting Luv’s experience as indicative of a female experience, one would first have to accept the misogynistic vision of what it means to be a woman. Luv is a single-faceted construction; a product designed for a function and therefore cannot experience the complexity that is womanhood.



Luv is a violent

replicant that serves terrifying ends; therefore, it is easier to see the dehumanized essence in her character. However, it might be more difficult to spot in the characters of Joi and Mariette, a hologram and a replicant respectively, whose goals live within the realms of love and liberation. The audience is first introduced to Joi when K returns home from a hard day's work of killing a fellow replicant. Joi is a hologram system that greets him upon arrival, simulating a 1950s housewife. Her arms can be seen in Fig. 2, placing the hologram meal over K's actual meal. Joi tries to cheer K up, cycling through different activities (reading and dancing) and outfits (50s pinup, 2049 cyberpunk, to gauche twenties flapper) to please him. K reveals he has a present for her. The image is a familiar simulation of what it might be like for a husband to purchase a wife a piece of jewelry (Fig. 10 & Fig. 11). The simulation continues when K encourages Joi to pretend that it is their anniversary to justify the gift. Their initial meeting sets the stage for the simulacrum that is their relationship. There are multiple levels of simulation going on just in their first scene, but their relationship continues to build on these themes. The gift allows the hologram to leave K's apartment and travel with him. The first thing they do is go outside, and Joi puts on a show of being impressed. She even simulates the feeling of rain washing over her body (Fig. 12).

Fig. 13

Fig. 14

Slavoj Žižek believes that Joi “commits the radical act of sacrificing herself for K, an act for which it (or, rather, she) was not programmed” (Zizek 8). The theorists Todd McGowan and Ryan Engley emphasize this idea. They suggest that this act of sacrifice means that Joi has achieved subjectivity and personhood (Engley and McGowan). The evidence, however, supports the opposite claim. Joi is a product whose primary goal is satisfying K. This means that every act she commits is with the express purpose of serving K. The only reason she sacrificed herself by encouraging K to delete her backup is because that is what K wanted to hear. Her sacrifice is not a result of free will, but the destiny of the commodity. This simulation of sacrifice only serves to further emphasize how far it is from sacrifice. Instead, it is a cynical act of capitalist exploitation. The commodity, manipulating the individual into being happy with a product they did not need.

The hologram is a further step removed from humanity even than the replicant. Therefore, it could be interpreted that this relationship makes K feel more human, but that is not the case. The relationship between K and Joi solidifies K's reality as a replicant. He does not seek human or even replicant relationships, though he is offered it on the street and there is heavily implied sexual tension between him and his boss, Lt. Joshi. Joi, the hologram, is a tool designed to serve K's desire. There is not even synthetic memory in Joi's mind. It is a complete fabrication of 1s and 0s. This point is obfuscated throughout the film because Joi seems to love K. She even professes it just before she is destroyed, but everything she does is to serve K because that

is what she has been programmed to do. Simulating the feeling of the rain gives K the pleasure that he freed her, that his investment was worth the money. Joi hired Mariette to serve K. Finally, her sacrifice is no sacrifice at all, but the algorithmic function of the commodity, reading the desire of K and fulfilling it to ensure satisfaction with the product. The film makes this abundantly clear when K is at his lowest moment and a towering holographic



advertisement

for the Joi product approaches him. Heartbreakingly, the hologram points at K and says, “You look like a good Joe.” Joe was the nickname that Joi gave to K throughout their journey together. The holographic advertisement displays the words “Joi. Everything you want to hear. Everything you want to see” (Fig. 15 & Fig. 16). The truth becomes abundantly clear that Joi was just an algorithm. Her love was a simulation of what love was supposed to look like, as was her sacrifice. Joi might as well have never existed at all, just like the misogynistic fantasy.

Human Subjects Within the Hyperreal

Lt. Joshi is one of the few humans in Blade Runner 2049. She is the fundamental opposition to Wallace and his desire to produce a procreating replicant. She is strong, independent, and powerful. Her desires are her own, and she works toward those desires effectively. As the only woman depicted in the film, she stands in stark contrast to the simulations of women in the form of Joi and Luv. These two simulations emphasize the humanness of Lt. Joshi and undermine the misogynist fantasy. This is a positive. However, her role in propping up the hyperreal alongside Wallace is worthy of exploration.



The hyperreal is a system that feeds and is fed by capital. It is a closed loop, or a Mobius strip, and the replicant is the foundation of this Mobius strip. The first creator of the replicant is Eldon Tyrell with the Tyrell Corporation. The Rebel from “Blade Runner 2022: Black Out” ushered in the end of the Tyrell Corporation when he blew up the servers that housed all the data collected on replicants, leading to government regulation. Niander Wallace and the Wallace Corporation take over the mantle of the Tyrell Corporation. In “Blade Runner 2036: New Dawn,” Wallace visits government officials accompanied by an illegally constructed replicant. He informs these government officials that he has created a new type of replicant that is even further removed from humanity, a replicant with no agency whatsoever. As the government officials protest this intrusion and chastise Wallace for breaking the law, Wallace orders the replicant to break a glass and kill itself with a shard of glass. The replicant obeys, and as it slits its throat, one of the government officials, an elderly woman, watches on with what can only be described as delight (Fig. 17). This delight can be interpreted as the recognition of her own humanity. In seeing the replicant commit this heinous act on demand, she rediscovers her reality. Wallace becomes the simulator, a harbinger of the hyperreal, a reaffirmation of humanity itself, and finally a reconstitution of the hyperreal.

Lt. Joshi, while opposing Wallace, commits the same sins as Wallace. Her opposition to him only fuels his drive and pushes the capitalistic mode. In her attempt to eliminate the procreating replicant, she fuels the hyperreal. Wallace doubles down on committing resources, and Lt. Joshi doubles down on committing resources. Each of their actions are “inscribed in the decoding and orchestration rituals of the media, anticipated in their presentation and their possible consequences” (Baudrillard 22). Each of their moves is choreographed. Neither wants to undermine the fundamental order, but rather to sustain it in one sense and extend it in another. Zizek claims, “the movie does render nicely the antagonism between State and its apparatuses (personified in Joshi) and big corporations (personified in Wallace) pursuing its self-destructive end” (Zizek 5). However, this antagonism is weak. Neither Wallace nor Joshi would exist without the other. They are fundamental to this hyperreal reality, and their different goals work to achieve the same goal. Their antagonism is a simulation.

If either of them were to succeed in their aims, would the world change? The procreating replicant already exists. The hyperreal is already manifest. Neither one is a revolutionary, and both seek to maintain the status quo.

Conclusion

Thus is the fate of the simulacrum. its existence is merely a symptom and a support of the hyperreal. Each act committed, even under the illusion of love or of revolution, particularly in the hope of establishing or bolstering personhood, is an act to sustain the status quo—propagation of the hyperreal. Memory is a manufactured product designed to create identities. In this world, humanity uses all the modes of simulation to justify a reality that no longer exists. Capital has destroyed and subsumed it. In this world, losing the real does not matter as long as they have credits in their account and they have a simulacrum to define themselves against. The hyperreal can go on, must go on, otherwise humanity loses its sense of the real and the simulated.

Blade Runner shows us the importance of defining and owning personhood as the encroachment of simulation and commodification becomes ever more present in daily life. As humans we must resist using an algorithm as a mirror to define the self as K does with Joi. AI and social media seek to reconfigure the real to suit their interests. The film warns us that we risk losing our identities to corporations that seek to blur the lines of personhood and simulation in the pursuit of profit.

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